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This article looks at Mao Zedong's military teachings in light of his diminished stature in today's China. In an effort to predict the survivability of those ideas, the author evaluates the influence of Clausewitz in their formulation.

INTRODUCTION

THE myth of Mao Zedong is being dismantled rapidly in contemporary China. China's leaders contend that Mao

made "mistakes," and the formerly omnipresent pictures of Mao and "Little Red Books" are only memories. In almost every area of policy, China's post-Mao leadership is pursuing objectives profoundly different from Mao's through the most pragmatic means. For the Chinese

Mao as a Clausewitzian Strategist

R. Lynn Rylander



military, this means a new emphasis on qualitative improvement as part of the four modernizations.

As China moves toward military modernization, its doctrine, strategy and tactics must adjust inevitably to greater firepower, higher mobility, enhanced command and control, and other drastically changed circumstances. The degree of ease or difficulty with which this transition is achieved will depend, in large measure, on the extent to which existing Chinese military precepts exhibit valid and enduring features. In particular, can Mao's concept of People's War serve as the philosophical foundation for the transformation of the Chinese armed forces, or must Mao the military theoretician be scrapped along with Mao the ideologist?

People's War, in isolation, obviously will not meet China's needs into the 21st century, but there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that Mao was a student of Karl von Clausewitz. To the extent that the more broadly applicable Clausewitzian principles underlie Mao's military works, Mao the military theoretician may continue to play a major role in China's military modernization

DID MAO STUDY CLAUSEWITZ?

The question of whether Mao *consciously* incorporated Clausewitz's ideas in his own military doctrine focuses historically on the latter half of the 1930s. For Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, war began in 1927 with the abortive Autumn Harvest Uprising. It was the events surrounding this and the Guangzhou and Nanchang Uprisings that signaled the Communist decision to attempt a military solution in the wake of

the Guomindang purge in April and the formation of the Red army in August. For the next seven years, the Communist Party's military line remained unsettled, and, through most of the period, Mao had little influence over its development.

This period was characterized primarily by conventional military operations, epitomized by the catastrophic "Li Li-San Offensive" in 1930. The failure of this Communist campaign led to somewhat greater influence for Mao and his ideas. But, within a year, as a result of Comintern-backed criticism, Mao had once again lost a great deal of his influence. At the 1932 Ningdu Conference, he was removed from the chairmanship of the party's Military Committee.

The watershed for Mao occurred soon thereafter at the January 1935 Zunyi Conference—held in the middle of the Long March—at which Mao's control over military affairs was finally consolidated. With his legitimacy thus confirmed and the later establishment of the Red Army College in Yanan to serve as his forum, Mao entered the most significant period in the codification of his military thought.

Following the arrival of Communist forces in Yanan in October 1935 after the Long March, Mao applied himself to a number of duties. One of these duties was lecturing on military affairs at the Red Army College which trained officers for the war against Japan. Partly as a result of those lecturing duties, the period 1936-38 was a particularly prolific one for Mao as shown in the chart.

It seems likely that, between his arrival in Yanan (October 1935) and the completion of his first major military work (December 1936), Mao was involved in extensive scholarship in military matters. On the one hand, he would have had little time to do so in an organized fashion dur-

Mao Zedong's Major Military Writings, 1936-38

| | |
|--|------|
| Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War (Lectures) | 1936 |
| On Guerrilla Warfare | 1937 |
| Basic Tactics (Lectures) | 1938 |
| Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War Against Japan | 1938 |
| On Protracted War (Lectures) | 1938 |
| Problems of War and Strategy (Speech) | 1938 |

ing the arduous Long March. On the other hand, his major concepts were already fairly well-developed and thoroughly documented in his earliest 1936 lectures. While the historical record of that period provides no conclusive evidence that Mao studied Clausewitz during his research, several factors point in that direction.

First, it would have been completely natural for a teacher such as Mao to research his lectures thoroughly. He had earlier taught at several academic levels, and he later confessed to Edgar P. Snow that:

all I ever wanted to be was a teacher. I do not like to hear all this 'great business, about being a great leader, great helmsman'

It is unlikely that a dedicated teacher such as Mao would have approached a task as complex as developing and expressing military doctrine without a thorough review of the literature that could have included Clausewitz.

We have considerable direct evidence of Mao's research. In a conversation during the Cultural Revolution, Mao recalled that "when I wrote about what I called problems of strategy [that is, 1936-38] I went over the 'Military Strategies of Sun Tzu' roughly."² Mao also relied heavily on Marxist-Leninist ideology for his political

inspiration and, to a lesser extent, for military background (for example, Lenin's 1906 article on guerrilla warfare).

Building on his childhood fascination with China's history, he referred repeatedly (and in great detail) to key battles and wars ranging from the eighth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. He also referred to the long succession of Chinese rebellions—from the White Lotus Uprisings in the 13th and 14th centuries to the 1911 revolution that Mao experienced briefly firsthand.

In addition, Mao drew on the heroic exploits of Chinese fiction—epic works such as *Water Margin* and *Travels in the West*—to illustrate his points. As Samuel B. Griffith noted, through those stories, "Mao painlessly assimilated a sound education in the arts of generalship and strategy and the science of tactics."³

Mao undoubtedly had ample opportunity to study Clausewitz during this period. We know that Clausewitz was well-known in China. Many of Mao's senior commanders were graduates of the Guomindang Military Academy at Huangbu (including Lin Biao, president of the Red Army College) which had benefited from German advisers. Others had received training in warlord schools that stressed Clausewitzian principles, and still others had been exposed to Russian training

with a similar emphasis.

Finally, Mao drew heavily on the works of Lenin who, in turn, had carefully read (and heavily annotated) his copy of *On War*. Thus, from almost every quarter, Mao could have been exposed to Clausewitzian influences.

Mao offered a few specific clues to suggest that he worked directly from Clausewitz. He quoted Clausewitz only once in *On Guerrilla Warfare*:

*Clausewitz wrote, in On War: 'Wars in every period have independent forms and independent conditions, and, therefore, every period must have its independent theory of war.'*⁴

Mao quoted Clausewitz a second time—"War is merely the continuation of policy by other means."⁵—but either he or his editors (we cannot be sure) traced the phrase to Lenin. To his credit, Lenin, in 1915, averred that Clausewitz was the source. Moreover, in discussing the nature of war, Mao placed several of his (Clausewitzian) ideas in quotation marks, perhaps acknowledging his debt. Those phrases, which correspond directly with passages in *On War*, are: "Politics with bloodshed."⁶ "To preserve oneself and destroy the enemy."⁷ "Deprive him of the power to resist."⁸

Thus, there is considerable, if circumstantial, evidence that suggests that Mao studied *On War* as he was synthesizing his own military philosophy in the months following the Long March. Given this possibility, the key question becomes: Was Clausewitz a major influence on Mao?

WERE MAO'S IDEAS CLAUSEWITZIAN?

The depth of Clausewitzian influence on Mao's ideas can be gauged by comparing

the major points in Mao's writings with Clausewitz's treatment of the same topics in *On War*. Particular emphasis must be placed on the closely related areas of guerrilla and protracted warfare. But there are perhaps equally important, if less generally familiar, considerations such as the dynamic role of man, dialectics and the purely military viewpoint.

Guerrilla Warfare

Guerrilla warfare is the key link between Clausewitz and Mao. It is, of course, the basis of all of Mao's military writings—the specific kind of war Mao was addressing. Clausewitz, while not emphasizing it, devoted one chapter of *On War* ("The People in Arms") to the topic. In that chapter, he concluded that guerrilla operations could succeed only if the war is fought in the country's interior, the outcome is not determined in a single stroke, the theater of operations is large, the national character is appropriate to guerrilla war and the country is rough and inaccessible.

Mao also stressed these five conditions. Clausewitz's sense that the interior of the country represents a secure base is reflected in Mao's emphasis on base areas as the vital "rear" for guerrilla operations. The Communists' war against Japan, for example, was conducted from Shaanxi Province in the middle of China.

Clausewitz's second point—avoiding a single-stroke resolution of the conflict—is the basis of Mao's theory of protracted war which is addressed in detail later. Mao, like Clausewitz, recognized the need for a large theater for guerrilla operations. He stressed China's vast territory along with the semicolonial, semifeudal and economically backward nature of the country as necessary preconditions.

With regard to national character, the

temperament was certainly suitable in Mao's China which had a long history of rebellions and faced a Japanese invasion force. As Mao professed to André Malraux in the mid-1960s, "Everything grew out of a specific situation: we organized peasant revolt, we did not instigate it."⁹

Clausewitz's last point—inaccessibility—was given a slightly different twist by Mao. While he noted the obvious advantages of base areas in mountains, he contended that base areas could also be established successfully in relatively open areas if they were extensive enough to allow the guerrillas to *maneuver* to avoid enemy operations.

Thus, for Clausewitz and Mao, the basic conditions for successful guerrilla operations were compatible. Likewise, their views on the *conduct* of guerrilla warfare conform closely.

Mao's guerrilla warfare theory was summarized in his six principles:

1. *Retention of the initiative; carefully planned tactical attacks in a war of strategic defense; tactical speed in a war strategically protracted; tactical operations on exterior lines in a war conducted strategically on interior lines*
2. *Conduct of operations to complement those of the regular army.*
3. *The establishment of bases*
4. *A clear understanding of the relationship between the attack and the defense*
5. *The development of mobile operations*
6. *Correct command*¹⁰

Mao's first point differentiates guerrilla warfare from conventional operations. The key principle is flexible use of dispersal and concentration coupled with rapid shifting of forces. It is best summarized in Mao's famous 16-character formula:

*The enemy advances, we retreat;
The enemy camps, we harass;
The enemy tires, we attack;
The enemy retreats, we pursue.*¹¹

Clausewitz earlier described guerrilla war in much the same way—as "nebulous and elusive," without concrete resistance, but with concentration of forces at the appropriate time.

Mao's primary objective was to develop a "jigsaw pattern" in which regular forces operated strategically on *interior* lines of communication while guerrillas operated on *exterior* lines—that is, in the enemy's rear. In this mode, the guerrillas would destroy small enemy units, harass and weaken larger ones, attack lines of communication, force the enemy to disperse his strength and coordinate their activities with conventional forces. Clausewitz's view on the nature of guerrilla operations was strikingly similar:

*Once the victor is engaged in sieges, once he has left strong garrisons all along the way to form his line of communication, or has even sent out detachments to secure his freedom of movement and keep adjoining provinces from giving him trouble; once he has been weakened by a variety of losses in men and materiel, the time has come for the defending army to take the field again.*¹²

Both Clausewitz and Mao believed that coordination between guerrilla and conventional forces was essential. Clausewitz felt that guerrillas should not try to "pulverize the core" but, rather, should "nibble" around the edges of the theater, leaving the "pulverizing" to the regulars.¹³ Similarly, Mao believed in the central importance of effective regular operations since guerrilla operations alone could not achieve victory.

The common emphasis on Mao's third point—bases—was noted earlier. Despite their recognition of the vital importance

of secure bases, however, neither man viewed bases as a strictly territorial concept. Clausewitz argued that destroying enemy forces (or preserving one's own) should be the primary consideration, as opposed to holding onto territory. Mao, agreeing, wrote that "to gain territory is no cause for joy and to lose territory is no cause for sorrow."¹⁴ This flexibility to relinquish territory in the face of superior force is, of course, what makes guerrilla war work.

Mao's fourth point dealing with the relationship between attack and defense embodies the concept of *tactical* guerrilla offensives in the enemy's rear while on the *strategic* defensive in a protracted war. Clausewitz's treatment of attack and defense is much more extensive than Mao's—two complete books of *On War* deal specifically with those issues. It is interesting, therefore, that his conclusion with regard to the role of guerrilla forces is almost identical to Mao's. It is based on the principle of "seldom, or never, allowing this important means of defense to turn into tactical defense."¹⁵

Mao's fifth principle—mobile warfare—is made possible by the protracted nature of Mao's war. Through the course of protracted war, as guerrilla units become better trained and equipped and improve their political and disciplinary reliability, Mao viewed them as ready to be transformed into regular units capable of offensive *campaigns* along *extensive fronts* in the enemy's rear.

Not surprisingly, Clausewitz did not go so far as to advocate the ultimate regularization of guerrilla forces. They simply would not have fitted into the more formal, rigid conventional formations of the time. He did, however, envision much the same accretion of strength and growing threat to the enemy's rear. He foresaw, over time, increasingly large

and well-organized guerrilla units operating on the enemy's flanks in conjunction with parties of regulars who would "make them look like a proper army and enable them to tackle larger operations."¹⁶ As strength increased, guerrilla activity would focus more directly on the enemy's stronger, more heavily defended rear.

The last of Mao's six principles was correct command which, for Mao, meant emphasis on strategic centralization and tactical decentralization. Certainly, this is compatible with Clausewitz who placed so much emphasis on "genius." But, while Clausewitz stressed this vital attribute of leadership, he also recognized—like Mao—the need for decentralization in the field—that "only in a great battle does the commander-in-chief control operations in person. . . ."¹⁷

Protracted War

Along with his views on guerrilla war, Mao is best known for his theory of protracted war. Indeed, it is the dynamics of protracted war that make his guerrilla doctrine work. Both Mao and Clausewitz recognized that a protracted conflict exacerbates an invader's disadvantages. Losses over time, coupled with the need to secure extended lines of communication against guerrilla attacks, would gradually work in the defender's favor by sapping the invader physically and psychologically.

Mao divided protracted war into three stages: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate and strategic counteroffensive. In the first, Mao envisioned the enemy (in his case, Japan) becoming overextended in his offensive. He believed that the overextension would ultimately lead to flagging morale, pessimism, economic difficulties and general war weariness as ac-

companiments to a gradual shift in the military balance. In this stage, conventional mobile warfare was to be stressed, supplemented by guerrilla and positional warfare.

Mao believed a strategic stalemate would ultimately develop because the enemy would begin to experience shortages of troops while meeting increasingly firm resistance. This would force him to halt his strategic offensive to secure his occupied areas. Mao believed the stalemate would last for a relatively long time and would be the most trying time for the defenders. He argued that, during this stage, combat operations would be primarily guerrilla in nature, supplemented by mobile operations. In both of the first two stages, Mao sought to avoid decisive engagements under conditions in which Chinese forces were not confident of victory.

In the third stage, the Chinese would begin the strategic counteroffensive. In this stage, reliance would be placed on mobile warfare, but, with the recapture of occupied territory, positional warfare would also begin to play a part. Guerrilla forces would play a supplemental role while conducting more conventional operations. In this stage, the decisive battle leading to ultimate victory would no longer be eschewed since the balance of forces would no longer be unfavorable to the Chinese.

Clausewitz addressed the concept of protracted war in the context of withdrawing regular forces into the interior of the country—a move to be avoided if possible because it delayed the final decisive resolution of the conflict. He asserted that withdrawal should be contemplated only if the defending forces were incapable of meeting the attacker at the border and sufficient space were available. (Incidentally, Clausewitz

observed that nowhere in Europe outside of Russia was there adequate space for this maneuver.)

Given these conditions, which conform closely to those under which Mao's forces operated, Clausewitz's view of withdrawal (in effect, the equivalent of Mao's strategic defensive) was compatible with Mao's concepts. He saw it as a "special form of indirect resistance—a form that destroys the enemy not so much by the sword as by his own exertions."¹⁸

Clausewitz did not dwell on Mao's second stage (strategic stalemate). Rather, he went to history for an example of the gradual shift to the third and final stage:

*The Russians [in 1812] showed us that one often attains one's greatest strength in the heart of one's own country, when the enemy's offensive power is exhausted and the defensive can then switch with enormous energy to the offensive.*¹⁹

Mao used the same example to illustrate the same point in *On Guerrilla Warfare*.

Once in the third stage (counteroffensive), Clausewitz, like Mao, foresaw the defenders pursuing the decisive battle in a "sudden powerful transition to the offensive—the flashing sword of vengeance. . . ."²⁰

The Dynamic Role of Man

Both Clausewitz and Mao recognized that the resolution of conflict ultimately rested with man—that other considerations such as terrain and weather were secondary. Clausewitz defined this primary role in terms of "moral factors" (everything that is created by intellectual and psychological qualities and influences) and especially genius (virtuosity of intellect and temperament). These issues were addressed extensively in *On War*, but this passage gives a good

general sense of Clausewitz's conclusions:

*The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force, practically merging with it, since the will is itself a moral quality. . . . History provides the strongest proof of the importance of moral factors and their often incredible effects. . . .*²¹

Mao's equivalent of moral factors is man's dynamic role in war which he, like Clausewitz, treated explicitly. For comparison, the following appears in *On Protracted War*:

*True, victory or defeat in war is decided by the military, political, economic and geographic conditions on both sides, the nature of the war each side is waging and the international support each side enjoys, but it is not decided by these alone; in themselves, all these provide only the possibility of victory or defeat but do not decide the issue. To decide the issue, subjective effort must be added, namely, the directing and waging of war, man's dynamic role in war.*²²

Interestingly, Mao's observations on the dynamic role are interspersed with Clausewitzian observations on war as the continuation of politics and politics with bloodshed (both quoted) suggesting that Mao is giving credit where credit is due.

Dialectic Relationships

The concept of dialectic relationships—one of the primary analytical tools of Marxism-Leninism—appeared in much the same context with regard to war in the works of Clausewitz and Mao. In dealing with attack and defense, Clausewitz observed:

When, however, we are dealing with

*two different things that have a common relation external to themselves, the polarity lies not in the things but in their relationship. . . . Polarity, then, does not lie in attack or defense, but in the object both seek to achieve: the decision.*²³

Mao's views on the topic are best expressed in *On Contradiction*, a 1937 work that is part of the theoretical framework of Mao's brand of communism:

*In war, offense and defense, advance and retreat, victory and defeat are all mutually contradictory phenomena. One cannot exist without the other. The two aspects are at once in conflict and in interdependence, and this constitutes the totality of a war, pushes its development forward and solves its problems.*²⁴

Purely Military Viewpoint

Both Mao and Clausewitz opposed the "purely military viewpoint" and for strikingly similar reasons. Clausewitz argued that political considerations must not be ignored in military planning except in a situation in which "pure hatred" was the sole motivating factor. Mao repeatedly chastised his military colleagues for holding a purely military viewpoint that regarded military and political affairs as opposites and failed to recognize that military affairs were "only one means of accomplishing political tasks."²⁵ (Note the Clausewitzian continuum between politics and war in Mao's statement.)

In sum, Mao seems to have had both the motivation and opportunity to study Clausewitz as he polished his own military thought. There is limited direct evidence of Clausewitz in Mao's work, but, more importantly, Mao's key ideas appear to be Clausewitzian in nature. If this is, in fact, the case—if Mao was a Clausewitzian strategist—what are the implications?

WILL MAO'S IDEAS ENDURE?

Mao's military theories served as the philosophical basis of the Chinese Communist operations against the Japanese in World War II and their eventual consolidation of power in China. Also, in later years, Mao's People's War served as the theoretical model for other Communist revolutionary movements. Primarily because of the prospect of China's huge population simply overwhelming any potential foe by sheer strength of numbers alone, People's War has retained currency in China as one of the main deterrents against Soviet aggression.

If his ideas are to endure, however, they must remain applicable to a modernizing China. The Chinese have already de-

veloped the concept of "People's War under modern conditions" in recognition of that fact. As Mao's myth becomes increasingly tarnished—as more "mistakes" come to light—the "modern conditions" could be increasingly stressed at the expense of "People's War."

However, if Mao's ideas have Clausewitzian roots, as the above evidence suggests, then his theories may have the broader applicability needed to make them relevant to a modernizing military establishment. Just as the "people in arms" were only one part of the larger conflict for Clausewitz, Mao's People's War of the 1930s can still be valid for China in the 1980s. Thus, even as Mao the ideologist is retired, Mao the Clausewitzian strategist is likely to remain a major military influence in China—in fact if not in name.

NOTES

1 Mao's 1971 interview with Edgar Snow is related in Han Suvin, *The Morning Deluge* Little Brown & Co. Boston, Mass. 1972 p. 383.

2 This 1968 statement appears in *Miscellany of Mao Tse Tung Thought* Joint Publications Research Service, Arlington, Va. 1974 p. 476.

3 Samuel B. Griffith, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army* McGraw-Hill Book Co. N.Y. 1967 p. 211.

4 Mao Zedong, *On Guerrilla Warfare* translated by Samuel B. Griffith Praeger Publishers, N.Y. 1966 p. 49.

5 Mao Zedong, *Selected Military Writings*, Foreign Language Press, Beijing, China, 1966. The phrase is quoted on page 227 and the reference to Lenin appears in a note on page 265.

6 Zedong, *Selected Military Writings* op. cit. # 229.

7 *Ibid.* p. 230.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Andre Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs* Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. N.Y. 1968 p. 360.

10 Zedong, *On Guerrilla Warfare* op. cit. p. 96.

11 Zedong, *Selected Military Writings* op. cit. # 72.

12 Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1976 p. 483.

13 *Ibid.* pp. 480-81.

14 Mao Zedong, *Basic Tactics*, translated by Stuart Schram, Praeger Publishers, N.Y. 1966 p. 67.

15 Clausewitz, op. cit. p. 482.

16 *Ibid.* p. 481.

17 *Ibid.* p. 258.

18 *Ibid.* p. 469.

19 *Ibid.* p. 220.

20 *Ibid.* p. 370.

21 *Ibid.* pp. 184-85.

22 Zedong, *Selected Military Writings* op. cit. p. 226.

23 Clausewitz, op. cit. pp. 81-84.

24 Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, Foreign Language Press, Beijing, China, 1975, volume 1 p. 517.

25 *Ibid.* pp. 106-7.



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